

## "A Minority Within a Minority": Filipinos in the United Farmworkers Movement

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: When Professor Lorena Oropeza assigned us to write a term paper for her History 102M seminar on Latino American history, I originally planned to focus on the coalition of Mexican and Filipino farmworkers who established the United Farmworkers Movement. After some research, however, I realized that many of the works published about the UFW focus disproportionately on the Mexican perspective, only mentioned Filipinos in passing (if at all). Therefore, I shifted my focus by drawing from the words of Filipino farmworkers themselves to explain how they initiated the farmworkers movement and why they were ultimately excluded from the union and its legacy. By doing so, I do not wish to diminish the importance of the work of Cesar Chavez and Mexican farmworkers, but rather bring awareness to the Filipino farmworkers whose experiences and contributions are often overlooked despite their significance.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Mariel Barbadillo has written an outstanding essay of historical recovery. Her work highlights the Filipino experience within the United Farmworkers Union (UFW). Even today, Cesar Chavez, who headed the UFW for decades, is probably the best known Mexican American in the country. Bardadillo's essay looks beyond the still prevalent associations between Chavez and the UFW, and between farmworkers and Mexicans and Mexican Americans more generally, to examine the long presence of Filipinos within this union. As Barbadillo makes clear, in 1965 Mexican Americans initially played "catch-up" with Filipino unionists who had walked off the field. Although the two groups soon decided to work together, that*

*decision left Filipinos a “minority within a minority.” Culturally, they found themselves excluded as the UFW became increasingly associated with the nascent Chicano movement. Politically, they lacked adequate representation to protect their interests. Eventually, they all left. As Barbadillo reveals, however, their critical role should not be forgotten.*

*— Lorena Oropeza, Department of History*

The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) was founded to fight for sustainable wages and better conditions for farmworkers in Delano, California and across the United States. Historically, the UFW has been mainly associated with the Chicano Movement due to its predominately Mexican-American membership and its famous leader, Cesar Chavez. Less often noted are the Filipinos who initiated the farmworkers movement by walking off the grape fields in 1965, later asking Chavez and his fellow Mexican-American farmworkers to join the strike. Despite their integral role, Filipinos have been largely excluded from the history of the UFW. This exclusion can be attributed to their exclusion from the union. After Filipino and Mexican-American farmworkers merged to form a single union, Filipinos were quickly outnumbered by their Mexican-American counterparts, becoming “a minority within a minority.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the union’s leadership, only two Filipinos held prominent board positions and even then they lacked substantial power in comparison to Chavez. In the hiring halls, there was a new preference for Mexican-American farmworkers, which alienated Filipinos who lost their seniority in the fields. Culturally, union leaders increasingly spoke Spanish in meetings and invoked Chicanismo in their slogans, marginalizing Filipinos who could not understand or relate to such aspects of Mexican culture. Perhaps the most controversial incident for Filipino farmworkers was Chavez’s visit to the Philippines in 1977 as a guest of President Ferdinand Marcos, who had implemented martial law five years prior. This series of factors—lack of Filipino leadership, hiring hall exclusion, growing Mexican ethnocentricity, and Chavez’s support of Marcos—gradually forced Filipinos out of the union. Marginalized in

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1 Philip Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement*, Seattle: University of Washington Press (2000), 107.

virtually every aspect of the union, Filipinos felt that the movement they helped create no longer served their interests and they were ultimately inclined to leave the UFW.

One of the earliest waves of Filipino migration began in the early 1900s, when many young, single men who hoped for better socioeconomic opportunities came to the United States. A majority of these early immigrants came from the Ilocos region of the Philippines, where they grew up in communities based on subsistence agriculture. Naturally, many Filipinos were drawn to jobs as farmworkers along the West Coast. One such farmworker was Larry Itliong, who migrated from Pangasinan, Philippines in 1929 and farmed various crops throughout California and Washington.<sup>2</sup> With decades of experience in the fields, Itliong joined the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in 1965. As part of the organizing committee, Itliong and fellow Filipino farmworkers Philip Vera Cruz and Ben Gines assisted in recruiting other Filipinos to the organization, such as Pete Velasco and Andy Imutan. Under the leadership these men, AWOC was successful in negotiating a 15-cent raise for farmworkers who were being paid 15 cents less than braceros during the grape harvest in the Coachella Valley.<sup>3</sup> When the strike ended, the wage was \$1.40 per hour plus 25 cents per box of grapes. Following this victory, Itliong, Vera Cruz, and the other Filipinos in AWOC began to organize farmworkers in Delano.

Labor organizing in the San Joaquin Valley, however, was more difficult than the Filipinos had expected. Because of the long harvest season, growers had sufficient time to find replacement pickers and were not inclined to negotiate wages, which were usually \$1.25 an hour and 10 cents per box—well below the minimum wage.<sup>4</sup> To put pressure on growers to pay farmworkers higher wages, Itliong, Vera Cruz, Velasco, Gines, and Imutan walked off the fields on September 8, 1965, which was the beginning of grape harvest season. Soon after, Filipino farmworkers refused to harvest grapes at ten vineyards in Delano, marking

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2 Matthew Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2014), 37.

3 *Ibid.*, 38.

4 Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, New York: Bloomsbury Press (2014), 105.

the beginning of what became known as the Delano Grape Strike of 1965. Growers responded by hiring scabs, who were mostly Mexican-American farmworkers, to break the strike. As Imutan recounted, “The struggle became a lot harder when Mexican workers started crossing our picket lines . . . The growers were very successful in dividing [Mexicans and Filipinos] and creating conflict between the two races.”<sup>5</sup> If other farmworkers continued working in the fields, the Filipinos’ strike would have ended in failure. Thus, Itliong sought the help of a fellow labor leader, Cesar Chavez.

At this time, Chavez was the leader of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), an organization of predominately ethnic Mexican farmworkers who emigrated from Mexico or were born in the United States. By the mid-1960s, Mexicans made up the largest portion of farmworkers in California. Chavez had initially decided the NFWA was financially unprepared to join the strike. However, NFWA members were unwilling to work in the fields while Filipinos were picketing, as they would be negatively regarded as breaking the strike of another farmworkers’ organization. Chavez put the issue to a vote at an emergency meeting on September 16, 1965, the 145th anniversary of Mexico’s independence from Spain. At the meeting, union members unanimously voted for *la huelga* (“the strike”).<sup>6</sup>

From that day forward, Mexicans and Filipinos picketed side-by-side, persuading other workers to join the strike. Perhaps their most successful rallying effort was the March 17, 1966 march from Delano to Sacramento. Starting with about seventy farmworkers and volunteers, AWOC and NFWA were joined by 10,000 supporters by the time they reached the California State Capitol Building on April 11.<sup>7</sup> The march was important in bringing national attention to the farmworkers movement, but it also dramatically suggested how powerful the Filipinos of AWOC and Mexican-Americans of NFWA would be if they worked together. On August 22, 1966, almost a year after the strike began, the two merged into a new organization: the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.

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5 Andy Imutan, “What happened when Mexicans and Filipinos joined together,” *United Farm Workers*, September 2005, Web.

6 Joan London and Henry Anderson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company (1971), 151.

7 Imutan, “When happened when Mexicans and Filipinos joined together.”

The merger between AWOC and NFWA proved successful; the strike ended in 1970 with a victory for the UFW, who were offered a contract that promised higher wages and improved working conditions. After the strike, however, union membership began to decline. Many families left the union and returned to work “because they had their families they had to feed.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, some farmworkers left due to issues arising in the union. After the merger, eight Filipinos, including Gines, left to join the International Brotherhood of Teamsters,<sup>9</sup> an American and Canadian labor union that Chavez claimed was “acting in concert with the growers to destroy” the organizing influence of AWOC, NFWA, and later the UFW.<sup>10</sup> While it is true that the Teamsters proactively attempted to undermine the competing farmworker organization, the flight of Filipinos from the UFW occurred for a variety of other reasons—primarily, there were concerns about representation in leadership, the hiring process, and the union’s culture.

Filipinos left the UFW in large part due to a lack of Filipino leadership; the Filipinos who did hold leadership positions lacked power in comparison to Chavez. Itliong, though he had launched the 1965 grape strike that drove the farmworkers movement forward, conceded leadership of the union to Chavez—mostly because the majority of farmworkers were Mexican-American.<sup>11</sup> Itliong was instead given the role of assistant director. Meanwhile, Dolores Huerta was named first vice president and Philip Vera Cruz second vice president. These roles had little meaning, however, as they were simply titles Chavez had accorded them. For the first several years of operation, the UFW was what Vera Cruz called an “ad hoc organization” because the organization did not hold official elections until 1971.<sup>12</sup> Itliong and Vera Cruz felt they had little credibility as leaders among the rank and file since they had not been elected as officers by the union members and instead were symbolically placed in leadership positions by the union director. When criticized for

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8 Lorraine Agtang. Interview by Robyn Rodriguez, PhD. Oral History Interview. Natomas, California, May 26, 2014.

9 Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 49.

10 David Harris, “The Battle of Coachella Valley: Cesar Chavez and UFW vs. Teamsters,” *Rolling Stones*. September 13 1973.

11 Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 120.

12 Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 49.

not taking on more responsibility in the union, Itliong replied, “How in the hell can you expect me to give an order to those volunteers? Every time I ask them to do a little something, they look at me like I’m crazy. They look at me like, ‘Who the hell are you? We work for Cesar Chavez.’”<sup>13</sup>

The notion that power within the union was concentrated under Chavez was well known among members and outsiders alike. Chavez was largely responsible for bringing the regional farmworkers movement national, and later international, attention by means of his charismatic leadership. In his 1967 book *Delano*, John Gregory Dunne described Chavez as having a “Messianic quality about him.”<sup>14</sup> Chavez became popularized as a larger-than-life figure, a redeemer intent on delivering farmworkers from injustice. As the years went on, Chavez cultivated an image of “the halting speech, the plaid shirt, the eagerness to perform penance for the smallest transgressions” that made him an icon bigger than himself, the union, and even the farmworkers movement.<sup>15</sup> This widespread admiration for Chavez drew more people to the farmworkers’ cause and Chavez himself was well aware of the growth of a “one man union,” stating, “If I leave, I bet you that most of the volunteers who work with me would leave . . . They’re here mostly because of me.”<sup>16</sup> Itliong, meanwhile, advocated for a more democratic distribution of power, warning of the dangers of such concentrated authority. “If you have a one man organization,” Itliong said, “once the man is gone, the organization is gone.”<sup>17</sup> Itliong remained assistant director of the UFW, realizing that his clashes with Chavez paled in comparison to the larger struggle for equity for farmworkers. Over the years, however, Itliong found it harder to fulfill his role with little support from both union members and his fellow leaders. Thus, in 1971, Itliong resigned.

With Itliong gone, Vera Cruz became the highest Filipino leader in the union. But, like Itliong, he felt distant from Chavez and his inner circle, which included Dolores Huerta, Gilbert Padilla, and other

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13 Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, 176.

14 John Gregory Dunne, *Delano*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux (1967)

15 Caitlin Flanagan, “The Madness of Cesar Chavez,” *The Atlantic*. July/August 2011.

16 Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, 177.

17 *Ibid.*, 178-179.

Mexican-American officials. At meetings, Vera Cruz said he found it difficult to make “sound judgments” because he was not informed about issues the board members had to vote on until the time of the meeting. He and Pete Velasco, another Filipino officer, were essentially asked to vote along with what Chavez and the other officers had already decided. Vera Cruz likened their role to a “rubber stamp,” giving only symbolic approval.<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason that Vera Cruz and other Filipinos thought of their leadership as tokenism—superficial inclusion of a minority group without any real efforts towards inclusivity.

This was evident in the debate over Agbayani Village, a series of retirement homes for elderly Filipinos, named after a fellow farmworker who died of a heart attack while picketing in 1967. The village in Forty Acres, Delano opened in 1975 and consisted of 60 private units as well as communal amenities for the senior farmworkers. Some of the oldest Filipino farmworkers who migrated to the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s reached the age of retirement by the time the UFW was established. Many, however, were unable to retire because they lacked a place to settle down. Additionally, Filipinos who came to the United States as single men were barred from marriage due to anti-miscegenation laws. Therefore, they did not have nuclear familial units and their careers as farmworkers did not provide the financial means to return to the Philippines. Agbayani Village thus provided many types of farmworkers with a place to call home where they could be surrounded by other farmworkers who essentially became their family.

The village faced financial obstacles, however. Due to limited funds, the union could not afford to pay more than a half-dozen workers to build the homes, so they relied heavily on volunteer labor to complete the construction. Once the village was built, the price of rent was so high that many retirees could not afford to live there. The union had established two rent prices: \$67.50 for original strikers who stayed with the union and did not go back to work, and \$80 for those who left the union.<sup>19</sup> Vera Cruz, as the highest Filipino leader, was put in charge of Agbayani Village. He challenged his fellow leaders with regards to the high rent prices, stating that retired farmworkers could live more

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<sup>18</sup> Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

efficiently in run-down bachelor hotels in the city.. Also, instituting a higher rate for those who left the union was essentially “discriminating against these old-time Filipinos” who may have been forced to leave the union and return to work due to financial reasons.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, despite giving Vera Cruz authority over Agbayani Village, Chavez and the board did not waver on their stance concerning rent prices and ignored Vera Cruz’s input, thereby preventing him from adequately carrying out his role on behalf of his people. With so few Filipino leaders and so little power, Filipino farmworkers felt they were not adequately represented; this ultimately drove them out of the union.

Filipinos faced exclusion not only in leadership but also in exclusion in the rank and file due to the union’s new hiring process. Before the merger, Filipino farmworkers generally migrated from the grape and asparagus fields in California to the canneries in Alaska, among other regions, according to season. Given that most Filipino farmworkers were unmarried men, many did not stay in one city longer than their work required. They did, however, maintain ties with foremen, who, prior to the UFW, controlled the hiring of farmworkers. In California, Filipinos frequently filled the position of foreman—one of the highest positions Filipinos were able to attain in the agricultural sector—and they often had close bonds with fellow countrymen in the fields. As Vera Cruz recalled, Filipinos farmworkers often had worked under the same foreman or labor contractor for as many as forty years.<sup>21</sup> When Filipino farmworkers circulated back to cities such as Delano, they contacted their former foremen who would be more than willing to offer them jobs as pickers in their field.

After the merger, however, the UFW established hiring halls in which union representatives, rather than foremen, were in charge of allocating jobs to farmworkers. The new system intended to end the cycle of migration that prevented farmworkers from settling in local communities, thereby providing agricultural businesses with year-round networks as opposed to seasonal laborers. For this reason, hiring halls preferred “settled, mostly Mexican-American farm workers living in the San Joaquin Valley.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, after the merger, growers would not

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20 Ibid., 102.

21 Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 109.

22 Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 121.



cooperate in supplying information for the UFW to determine seniority rankings among existing farmworkers. Filipinos who had been working for several decades “had to go to the union and stand in line with all the Mexicans” and when they finally reached the window, there would not be any jobs left.<sup>23</sup> Though the hiring halls were a well-intentioned establishment meant to create a fairer hiring process of farmworkers rooted in local communities, Filipinos were inadvertently alienated. Having been accustomed to a system that once benefitted them, many Filipinos began to distrust the UFW and some eventually left the union in favor of the Teamsters.

With an increasing lack of Filipino leadership and Filipino farmworkers, those who remained experienced marginalization on a cultural level as the UFW became a symbol of not just *la huelga* but also *la causa*, the emerging Chicano Movement that embraced Mexican heritage. Jose Jazmin, a musician in a Filipino band, noted this shift in the UFW’s culture. Before the merger, Jazmin’s band played for the *manongs* every Saturday at the Filipino Hall. “That was the hangout where all the Filipinos . . . congregate,” Jazmin said. “They would have the bands and social boxes. We would have to play all the old music, ‘Dahil Sa Iyo’ and all that kind of stuff.”<sup>24</sup> The Filipino Hall was, as its name suggests, a social environment where Filipinos could enjoy traditional music, food, and the company of their *mga kababayan* (fellow countrymen). Because it was already a popular meeting place for Filipinos, it became a headquarters for AWOC. NFWA, on the other hand, did not have such an established home base for their organization. Therefore, when AWOC and NFWA merged, the Filipino Hall became a headquarters for both the Filipinos and the Mexican-Americans of the UFW.

With Mexican members outnumbering Filipinos, the culture of Filipino Hall and the union overall transformed. Union meetings began to be conducted in Spanish to accommodate the largely Spanish-speaking audiences and union officials would often forget or were unable to translate to Tagalog or Ilocano.<sup>25</sup> This posed an obstacle especially for older Filipinos, most of whom only spoke Tagalog or their regional dialect.

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23 Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 123.

24 Jose Jazmin. Interview by Robyn Rodriguez, PhD. Oral History Interview. Orinda, California, February 13, 2015.

25 Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 108.

Vera Cruz noted that the language barrier “enhanced misunderstandings and increased mistrust” among Filipino union members who found themselves unable to fully participate in the meetings and the union at large.<sup>26</sup> The increasing Mexican ethnocentricity of the UFW and the corresponding marginalization of Filipinos were perhaps most represented in the union’s slogans. At meetings and on picket lines, union members would chant and hold posters that read “Si Se Puede,” “Viva La Raza,” “Viva La Causa,” and “Viva Cesar Chavez.” These statements acted as rallying cries that united and empowered the growing Mexican farmworker population in America by framing the farmworkers movement as part of the larger Chicano Movement. Such slogans had the unintended effect of alienating Filipino farmworkers. As Vera Cruz noted, “They didn’t realize that all these ‘Vivas’ did not include the Filipinos. As a matter of fact, they didn’t include anyone else but themselves.”<sup>27</sup> The influx of Mexican-American farmworkers in the UFW understandably led to more of an emphasis on Spanish language and Mexican culture within the union. But due to the language barrier and calls for unity based solely in Mexican culture, the Filipinos who had asked Mexicans to join the strike found themselves rendered invisible in the movement.

By the late 1970s, a majority of the Filipinos who were involved in the UFW at its inception had left. Realizing support among Filipino farmworkers was low, Chavez planned a trip to the Philippines in August 1977 with hopes that it would reignite morale among Filipinos and curtail their exodus from the union. Andy Imutan, a Filipino union member, arranged for Chavez to travel to the Philippines as the guest of President Ferdinand Marcos. Marcos was elected president in 1965, but in 1972 he declared martial law. His military regime was infamous for human rights violations such as kidnappings, torture, and extrajudicial killings of political enemies. When Chavez asked Filipinos for their opinion of the pending trip, Vera Cruz responded, “I don’t like the form of government Marcos has created there . . . It’s a dictatorship. There are thousands of political prisoners, people are arrested without charges or benefit of trial.” Moreover, since because Marcos declared labor unions illegal, prohibited strikes, and arrested labor leaders, the trip appeared at

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26 Ibid., 108.

27 Ibid., 113.

odds with everything that Chavez represented.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, Chavez visited Marcos in the Philippines. Much of his support for the president centered on his efforts to help farmers through land reform. Marcos established the Department of Agrarian Reform, which carried out a program that transferred ownership of land from private owners to tenant farmers who worked the fields. The reform was designed to make farmers self-reliant and give them a means to rise out of poverty—an initiative Chavez expressed solidarity with as a labor leader working towards greater socioeconomic opportunities for farmworkers. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Chavez praised what he had seen in the Philippines, stating that he had spoken with Filipino labor leaders “and every single one of them said that it’s a hell of a lot better now” than before Marcos imposed martial law.<sup>29</sup> Only a small percentage of farmers, however, were qualified to own land under the program, which was limited to privately-owned rice and corn fields; Marcos allowed for coconut and sugar fields to remain monopolized and for foreign corporations to retain their sizeable landholdings.<sup>30</sup> Marcos’ favoring of big business over the Filipino people, among other injustices, ignited anger among Filipino farmworkers abroad. In an interview to *El Cubamil*, Vera Cruz stated that Chavez’s support for Marcos contrasted with his previous condemnation of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza and contradicted the union’s dedication to nonviolence and justice.<sup>31</sup> By condemning an oppressive regime in Latin America while being the honored guest of an oppressive Filipino leader, Chavez further alienated Filipinos in the UFW, demonstrating his disregard for their concerns.

Rather than admit his visit to Marcos had aggravated Filipino laborers back home, Chavez attempted to justify his actions. “I did not praise martial law,” Chavez said at a public forum at Delano High School. “I did praise President Marcos’ action in calling for elections.” Chavez also

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28 *Ibid.*, 133.

29 Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, 367.

30 “DAR Historical Background,” *Republic of the Philippines Department of Agrarian Reform: Kagarawan ng Repormang Pansakahan*. 2013. <http://www.dar.gov.ph/component/content/article/9-main/996-dar-historical-background>

31 Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 270.

contended that he did not see evidence of human rights abuses or torture.<sup>32</sup> Doubling down on his efforts, Chavez invited Blas Ople, Secretary of Labor under Marcos, and Consul General Roman Arguelles, to address Filipino farmworkers at the UFW convention. Instead of speaking to the concerns of Filipinos in America with regards to the state of affairs in their motherland, the Philippine officials espoused “glorification of Marcos,” reiterating their regime’s propaganda of freedom and democracy despite their repressive and undemocratic practices.<sup>33</sup> This fueled the anger of Filipinos such as UFW volunteer Rudy Reyes, who took the stage to denounce the Marcos regime. After Ople finished speaking, Reyes said of him, “I hope he does not forget to tell Marcos to lift martial law.”<sup>34</sup> This aroused cheers from the Filipino people, who felt their union director had betrayed them for dishonest foreign administrators. It was what Vera Cruz regarded as “the final blow.”<sup>35</sup> During his twelve years in the UFW, Filipinos had been marginalized bureaucratically and culturally, preventing leaders and members alike from fully expressing themselves in the union. Chavez’s visit to the Philippines only added to the burden Filipino farmworkers felt within the union. Thus, during the convention, Vera Cruz resigned.

A majority of Filipinos consequently left the UFW due to exclusion in the union’s leadership, in the new hiring process, in efforts towards cultural unification, or because of the director’s disregard for their political concerns. The Filipinos who led the grape strike of 1965 had by the late 1970s been forced out of their official positions and struggled to retain authority while power became consolidated under Chavez. Filipinos who remained faced difficulties in hiring halls that overlooked migrant workers and failed to recognize their seniority, causing them to lose the jobs they had worked for decades prior. Due to the influx of Mexican-American farmworkers in the union, the cultural shift towards Chicanismo marginalized Filipinos who could not understand the Spanish language or relate to Mexican heritage. And, finally, when Chavez ignored their pleas not to visit Marcos and essentially supported the dictator’s regime, Filipino farmworkers realized the union director they trusted to fight for

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32 Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, 368.

33 Vera Cruz, *Philip Vera Cruz*, 136.

34 *Ibid.*, 137.

35 *Ibid.*, 132.

justice at home did not value their fight for justice abroad. Few Filipinos remained in the union beyond the 1970s and consequently, there were few people to attest to the important contributions and experiences of Filipinos in the movement. The case of Filipinos farmworkers poses a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. They left the union because they felt alienated, but, because so many of them left, they have been largely erased from the historical legacy of the UFW, which today honors the efforts of Chavez and Mexican-American farmworkers while discounting the work of Itliong, Vera Cruz, and the Filipino farmworkers responsible for initiating the movement.

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